

With Regard to Animacy and Responsibilist Virtues

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A call for the study of Indigenous languages is an important if arduous consideration for inclusion in either mass public schooling or the narrower interests of philosophers of education. As noted by Shultz, Kimmerer's gestures to Potawatomi in her classes at the SUNY School of Environmental Science and Forestry are a significant pedagogical task in the effort for multilingualism and conceptual flexibilities in the development of scientists. Shultz writes of this multilingualism as the differences between the "lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy." The motivation for Kimmerer's use of Potawatomi then is to highlight relational terminologies—"personhood and kinship"—and the social habits of her students that might flow from such a shift in grammars and vocabularies. "If a maple is an *it*, we can take up a chainsaw," writes Kimmerer, "If it is a *her*, we think twice."¹

The pedagogical (and political) import of learning Potawatomi is noted by Kimmerer where she writes of "the light of understanding" for one of her students as they exclaim "doesn't that mean that speaking English, thinking in English, somehow gives us permission to disrespect nature? By denying everyone else the right to be persons? Wouldn't it be different if nothing was an *it*?"²

Kimmerer uses the English word animacy as a gloss of Potawatomi grammatical/morphological features operative with certain terms marking animate/inanimate. But this is a very complex distinction that Truer has noted is not fully understood by Ojibway speech communities of which Potawatomi is related. To use English glosses of kin and personhood then as a grammar of animacy can be misleading in several ways. That is to say, Kimmerer appears to use animate as synonymous with living and inanimate with non-living: she does not appear to provide her students with what seems to function as an 'it' in Ojibway.

For example, "half of body parts are animate (shoulder) and half are inanimate (brain, heart); plants are animate but some fruits are animate

(raspberries) and some are not (blueberries, wild rice).”³ Harvey continues to explore this differentiation, writing that

Sweetgrass, *wiingashk*, is inanimate while tobacco is animate. A canoe, *jimaan*, is inanimate but a canoe rib, *waaginnaa*, is animate. Like all trees, the birch, *wiigwaas* or *wiigwaasi-mitig*, is animate, and to remove its bark, *wiigwaasike*, is to act towards a person, so the verb is an animate intransitive one. The birch bark itself, *wiigwaas*, is inanimate, and while most objects made of it, including birch bark lodges, *wiigwaasabakwaan*, are inanimate, a birch bark roof *wiigwaasabakwaan*, is animate. The verb ‘to chew’ requires transitive animate, transitive inanimate and animate intransitive forms. It is possible to chew something or someone.⁴

In this last sentence we return the concern expressed by the student above, we find a term that appears to function as an ‘it’ where Harvey writes “we can chew something [an *it*] or someone *bread*.” Pedagogically then, Kimmerer may be seen as confusing the student where she does not lean into the complexity of the distinctions regarding animate/inanimate as they are operationalized in everyday usage. What makes my shoulder animate and my brain inanimate? With many of these terms a seasonal context is a determining factor—winter associated entities are animate (snow), summer associated entities are inanimate (water). In this way, the reference for a term can shift from animate to inanimate according to some speakers depending on the season. And again, according to Truer, the broad Ojibway speech community is unsure what the relation between seasons and animacy/inanimacy is.⁵ For this reason, one might be cautious about claims that this knowledge is adequately integrated into one’s cognitive character.

Similarly, insofar as Kimmerer is not clear with her students that there is no animate and inanimate hierarchy in Potawatomi, the dominant (English) bias toward animacy as the privileged term might be considered a mistranslation and misinterpretation of the complex categories in Potawatomi. That is, inanimate entities are just as valuable as animate ones; inanimate entities may also be said to be no less alive than animate ones. One does not need to make

“everything animate” to show regard to the non-human world nor perhaps to argue for a biospherical citizenship.

A grammar of animacy based in Kimmerer’s claims about the Potawatomi language can be inspiring for readers, yet the formulations that would “lead to whole new ways of living in the world . . . with a moral responsibility to water and wolves, and with a legal system that recognizes the standing of other species” needs additional elaborations linguistically, philosophically and pedagogically.⁶ As noted here from a linguistic consideration, students can have a responsibility to water, but it does not have to be based on the implied privilege of the category of animacy as alive. In another example, the prairies where sweetgrass grows would have no standing for legal protections because it is not considered animate, but a field of wild tobacco would. The philosophical and pedagogical challenges of clarifying the suggested moral responsibilities for bio-spherical citizenship that emerge for the latter, but not the former based on animacy do not appear fully addressed.

As I noted above, the pursuit of Indigenous language learning is critically important for Indigenous peoples and allied scholars and individuals. The sites of mass education however cannot provide the expertise or rigor required for its teaching. University settings may be viable, but there are additional concerns that have been documented in those settings, for example where the grammatical constructions of second language learners are technically correct, but these are not statements that a native speaker would make.

This might point us to that which Shultz mentions near the end of her essay, we can and should be very attentive to “how the more than human [is] depicted in the [English] literature, art and sciences that we teach about.”⁷ In this I completely agree that “speech and writing [are] critical to an ecological education” and moreover that open-mindedness is an essential virtue to be cultivated for these varied depictions

So despite the misinterpretation of animacy, Kimmerer’s student provides evidence of an epistemic virtue of open-mindedness (perhaps along with her intellectual courage to preserve in such a belief and intellectual humility).

This student considers how the terms of kin and person, English glosses of Potawatomi terms are nonetheless crucial to a certain pedagogical success by Kimmerer; Kimmerer has facilitated a classroom context to enact the epistemic virtue of open-mindedness. The student learns of personhood for entities she appears to not have considered so previously.

In this way, I would like to suggest that fostering the virtue of open-mindedness in classroom settings may be more pivotal to biospherical citizenship than what/who is animate in Potawatomi. Consider Battaly's outline of the epistemic virtue of open-mindedness,

The epistemic virtue of open-mindedness is (roughly) an acquired disposition to care about truth and care about generating and considering appropriate alternatives—to generate and consider ideas that are likely to be true and ignore ideas that are likely to be false.⁸

In closing then I would like to suggest that what we witness in Kimmerer's students are the enactment of a responsibilist virtue on their journey to respecting the forest, the latter I take to be synonymous with Shultz's "regard for" as necessary for biospherical citizenship. More specifically, we witness the five characteristics of responsibilist virtues as this student is trying to work out what it would mean for "nothing to be an *it*." Even where a misinterpretation of animacy is occurring we might say that the student cares about the truth of being respectful to the forest through which she is walking and learning with Kimmerer. In caring about that truth for respect of nature she also cares about finding, generating, and considering alternatives to her previous and perhaps exclusively scientific orientations. We can say further that we are witness to some kind of moral work and as such that work is deserving of praise by educators as Kimmerer seems to do. "It is part of the nature of a virtue in the standard case," writes Zagzebski "that it be an entrenched quality that is the result of moral work on the part of the human agent."⁹

While it may be premature to claim her respect for nature is an entrenched quality, the moral work of the student is clearly proceeding along the trajec-

ries of several lexicons—legal, scientific, personhood, arguably poetic as well. Kimmerer’s student is then engaged in epistemic action, of weighing evidence and formulating hypothesis trying to find the *appropriate* alternatives amidst all those that can appear to her. Indeed, in pursuing the appropriate alternative for a respect of the forest, the student embarks on a personal expression of what she cares about and is motivated to find out about; in what ways does a forest deserve respect. If “nothing is an it” perhaps the appropriate response is akin to biospherical citizenship as it can provide an appropriate alternative to those that promote disrespectfulness to the forest. The student proceeds by evaluating if the virtues are reliable in the real world.

Shultz’s call to *give regard* as crucial to biospherical citizenship is for me a profoundly important call to responsibilist virtues in education—open mindedness, intellectual courage, and intellectual humility among others. Kimmerer on this latter reading provides a pedagogy that appears to provide an incredibly successful learning context for responsibilist virtues even as the technical linguistic work might need greater elaboration.

REFERENCES

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- 2 Kimmerer, 19.
- 3 Anton Treuer, “Why are Things Animate or Inanimate in Ojibway?” YouTube Video. 7:22. April 1, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaWrAmxHl4>
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- 5 Treuer, “Why are Things Animate or Inanimate in Ojibway?”
- 6 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *The Democracy of Species*, 21.
- 7 Annie Shultz, “Publics of Animacy.”

8 Heather Battaly, “Extending Epistemic Virtue: Extended Cognition meets Virtue Responsibilism,” In J. Adam Carver et al. Ed. *Extended Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 196), 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198769811.003.0012>

9 Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 135), 1996. In Battaly “Extending Epistemic Virtue.”